

ABSTRACT
SOCIAL WORK

GILKEY, SONIA L.

B.A. ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY, 1997

A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE TRUANCY
INTERVENTION PANEL OF COBB COUNTY SCHOOLS

Advisor: Dr. Sarita Chukwuka

Thesis dated May, 2000

This is a research evaluation project designed to examine the program effectiveness of the Truancy Intervention Panel or TIP of Cobb County Schools, Georgia. In addition, this research evaluation investigated whether or not expansion efforts for service delivery by TIP into the entire school district was achieved. Finally, this research considered whether TIP's truancy intervention model can render long-term positive effects in dealing with truancy in the Cobb County School District.

An outcome/goal-based evaluation strategy was implemented to determine program effectiveness and achievement of goals. Data was collected from school attendance records and TIP's compiled statistics on truancy and attendance during the 1997-1999 school years. Measures of central tendency were used to analyze attendance data as well as expansion efforts data of TIP. Existing literature

on effective program models were examined to determine if TIP was an effective truancy intervention model.

The findings indicate that half of the students improved attendance during TIP intervention, and findings were no more significant for male students than female students. Additionally, it was determined that the expansion efforts for TIP to include the entire school district were not achieved. Finally, although existing literature suggest that TIP's truancy intervention model, a multi-disciplinary intervention approach, can render short-term positive effects in decreasing truancy, the model can be improved by incorporating incentive-based and educational support components to its approach. This increases the opportunity for long-term program effectiveness.

This study is important because findings provide some insight to TIP on improving its current model, as well consider implications for present and future truancy intervention programs and policies seeking to successfully respond to the issue of truancy and related problems.

A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE TRUANCY
INTERVENTION PANEL OF COBB COUNTY SCHOOLS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

BY
SONIA L. GILKEY

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2000

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the mind of the esteemed, astute, and erudite; whose hands work so diligently, inspiring in me the desire to work until the job is complete, Dr. Sarita Chukwuka, I thank you. For timeless efforts of knowledge and a genuine love for the healing of the human spirit, Professor Mary Curtis Ashong and Professor Hattie Mitchell, I thank you. For faithful commitment to children and families in need of social and educational support while facing the challenging task of academic achievement, Mrs. Hilary Carlin and Mr. Larry Riley, I thank you. For the heart of a woman who loved me best through words of encouragement and undying acts of faith, Mom I thank you. Finally, for the vision that inspires wisdom only my Father can give, God I thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In a country where education has been the subject of much discussion, particularly as drop-out rates and juvenile delinquency crimes have risen dramatically, the discussion would not be complete without seriously examining the level of truancy in this country. Historically, research on drop-outs, delinquents and criminal behavior indicate that offenders first hint of anti-social behavior was truancy (Snyder, 1988; Gavin, 1997). As we move into the 21st century, truancy is no longer considered a rule of thumb or past-time of young boys who regard "skipping class" as some sort of rite of passage. Unless viable, effective programs are implemented to deal with the issue of truancy, it will continue to plague the classrooms of America in mass numbers. Furthermore, the criminal justice system, the educational system, and social support or community-based agencies in this country will continue to encounter the long-term behavioral effects of truancy, such as burglary, auto theft, destruction of property, drugs and alcohol abuse, etc. (Gavin, 1997).

Statement of the Problem

Truancy is defined by Georgia law section 20-2-690 et seq. as the act of willful and/or continued unexcused absence from school. The local principal is authorized to take action designed to prevent a student's cutting of class or non-attendance contrary to law and Board of Education policy on truancy. The law further states that when all administrative actions taken to correct truancy have failed, the school system shall file proceedings in court and furnish evidence for conviction of parents and or child for non-compliance of the law. Many states have referred to their statutes on compulsory school attendance as a basis for dealing with truancy; imparting punitive consequences to the parents and children deemed to be exhibiting habitual truant behavior.

Student absenteeism has been a major concern for educators for many years, with the severity of attendance problems continuing to grow (Lovette & Jacob, 1995). Absenteeism has been declared a major classroom problem by 37 percent of teachers and 25 percent of principals as indicated by the Digest of Educational Statistics (1992). Missed educational time in school may lead to poor grades as well as additional absenteeism, leading to a vicious cycle of poorly skilled, uneducated, unemployable youth (Phillips, 1995). When assessing the problems associated with student absenteeism, truancy or the unwillingness to attend school

has been determined to be a primary reason for poor attendance according to literature dating as far back as the 19th century. A 19th century reform school superintendent who tabulated the bad habits of young men placed in his charge noted that being a truant was second only to lying as a recurring behavior (Gavin, 1997).

Unfortunately, as a child progresses in his/her education, the potential of willful non-attendance or truancy increases (Phillips, 1995). States attempted to deal with this unwillingness to attend school by instituting Compulsory School Attendance laws, however the policy has been relatively ineffective in dealing with truant behavior if one considers on average that at least 3% of 30 million children are truant each school day (NASW, 1992). The primary complaint of many parents and educators is that the laws are not strictly enforced. Opponents of Compulsory School Attendance laws argue that this type of policy leaves schools vulnerable to the increasing disorder in society, and excuses people from being responsible for their behavior (McGhan, 1997). Opponents believe that this type of irresponsibility creates an environment where tolerance for such intolerable behavior is encouraged and accepted by society at large (Anonymous, 1993).

Though school districts elect to deal with their truancy problems in different ways, this research evaluation project examines a truancy intervention approach in Cobb

County Schools, Georgia, that proposes supportive services and intervention strategies before punitive actions by the court are sought. This research evaluation presents an outcome and goal based evaluation of the Truancy Intervention Panel or TIP of Cobb County Schools in Georgia. The first goal of this research evaluation was to determine if any benefits for stakeholders were achieved as a result of the intervention. The benefit would be improved school attendance or decreased questionable or unexcused absences from school. The second goal of this research evaluation was to determine whether or not TIP achieved its two primary goals: Decrease the rate of truancy for those students referred to the panel and expand the service delivery area of the panel to include the entire Cobb County School District. Under the pilot plan, only five area schools were selected to participate in this truancy intervention project.

Two very important conclusions are often the result of research evaluation projects. The first is establishing a specific measurable outcome whereby a substantial change in the undesirable behavior, namely truancy, is positively affected by the interventions of the program or project, in this case TIP. Secondly, outcome and goal based evaluations enable stakeholders to consider changes that maybe needed to elicit better program effectiveness as well as determine

whether or not stated goals for the program are desirable and achievable.

Significance of the Study

School districts are monitoring truancy rates carefully, and in an effort to deal with the problem of truancy, they have instituted intervention programs. Many such programs are incentive-based such as the Learnfare Program of Wisconsin which linked eligibility for welfare to child's attendance to school (Anonymous, 1993), the LEAP Program of Ohio which offered financial incentives, penalties, and support services to teen mothers who attended school on a regular basis (Bloom, Fellerath, Long, and Wood, 1994), and the opening of a fast food restaurant on the campus as some school districts have done in an effort to curb poor attendance and truancy (Phillips, 1995).

Other districts have opted to use more traditional approaches such as mentoring programs, but such programs have failed to show a direct relationship between mentoring and a reduction in truancy (Royse, 1998). With each of these program approaches, each program indicated some improvement in attendance rates, however several had difficulty drawing definitive conclusions that the intervention applied was responsible for the change, and, further, whether or not this intervention approach was the primary factor in decreasing the rate of truancy for the clients being served.

Program evaluations for at least two of these programs, LEAP and Learnfare, were inconsistent with their findings (Reid, 1985; Bloom, Fellerath, Long, and Wood, 1994). This would seem to lend support to the need for program evaluations and the impact they can have on determining the difference between a program's perceived effectiveness and its actual performance.

Most programs are trying to find that exact blend that will influence a decrease in truancy or non-attendance rates in their school districts. This research evaluation project presents findings that enhance existing literature on truancy intervention programs. It is anticipated that the findings of this research evaluation project will reveal valuable information to stakeholders (i.e., students, administration, school social workers, juvenile court system) who have a substantial interest in the success/failure of projects such as this one. Further, it is expected that this research evaluation project will serve as a basis for professional knowledge particularly for social workers dealing with truancy.

For those implementing truancy intervention programs, Delgado (1996) advises that the program must consider shifting the paradigm from one of deficits to one of strengths. Better yet, Goolishian (1988) observes that problems like truancy are problem-determined and should be confronted from a problem-determined perspective. The

argument that systems do not produce problems, but rather problems produce or organize systems of problem-solvers can be very effective when attempting to determine the best approach to deal with problems like truancy. Projects like TIP can render long-term solutions ultimately impacting whether or not delinquent and/or criminal behavior will manifest if intervention is maintained and actively engages problem-solving efforts on a long-term basis. The social workers role in the ecology of schools is changing continuously, and the shift in focus from the individual child to targeting populations considered "at risk" will demand the that charge of social work practice, particularly school social work be redirected to a problem-determined, solution-focused strategy; where strength's are nurtured and deficits cultivated (Goolishian, 1988; Delgado, 1996).

If school districts and society in general hope to deal with truancy and the results of truant behavior, evaluations of intervention programs and/or strategies implemented are essential. Existing research presents very few evaluations of truancy intervention programs. Statistical information is reported, but little long-term supportive data indicating truancy intervention programs success/failure can be found in the literature.

The literature suggests that successful intervention programs with long-term positive effects have strategies-interventions in place that speak to the problems

encouraging truant behavior, provide incentives to discourage truant behavior, and allow for input from all stakeholders regarding program satisfaction. The demographics of clients, the school systems response to the problem, and student and parental input and accountability must be a part of the program development phase if the program is serious in addressing truancy and related issues. For this purpose, it is imperative that we understand and refine intervention programs in order to apply them effectively, which ultimately renders the intervention program or project successful.

This research evaluation project examines the Truancy Intervention Panel or TIP of Cobb County Schools, Georgia and its effectiveness in reducing truancy in the school district. In addition, this evaluation explores whether or not TIP successfully expanded its service delivery area to include the entire county. Finally, this research evaluation project considers whether or not TIP is utilizing the most effective program model approach in its attempt to deal with truancy in Cobb County Schools.

Overview of the Study

This research evaluation project examines truancy rates and their relationship to an intervention applied, namely the Truancy Intervention Panel of Cobb County School District. The effectiveness of the TIP on decreasing non-attendance that is questionable or unexcused, where truancy

is the dependent variable and TIP the independent variable is examined. TIP serves as the intervention component expressly designed to deal with truant behavior and address truancy related issues. Intervention provided by TIP includes home visits, monitoring of school attendance and unexcused or questionable absences, phone calls, and referrals to other supportive services determined to be necessary. Permission to conduct this research evaluation was granted from the Research, Evaluation, and Assessment Department of Cobb County Schools.

The research evaluation was implemented by retrieving data from the attendance records (archival data) of the twenty-one (21) students receiving services from TIP. The Panel's compiled statistics were also used (unobtrusive measures) to establish consistency in reported attendance. These twenty-one (21) students were involved with TIP during one academic school year; 1997-1998 or 1998-1999. There were eight (8) students in the pilot project the 1997-1998 school year, and thirteen (13) students during the following school year, 1998-1999. This focus of the research evaluation is outcome-based; that is it measures whether or not the intervention applied elicited improved truant behavior.

The second focus of this research evaluation is goal-based, which examines the extent TIP met its goals. TIP's primary goals were to reduce truancy in those students

referred to the Panel, and expand the service delivery area of TIP to include all schools in the school district. To obtain data for the second focus of this research evaluation, TIP's records identifying schools served were utilized.

Finally, the third phase of this research evaluation reviews the literature eliciting a qualitative analysis of effective truancy intervention models. The desire is to examine if TIP's current model, a multi-disciplinary intervention approach is the most effective model in positively influencing truant behavior in comparison to other truancy intervention models that have experienced success long-term. Since TIP is a fairly new project, considering long-standing truancy intervention models will provide significant insight to whether or not TIP can expect consistent results at the end of and after intervention.

Measures of central tendency were utilized to analyze data regarding attendance before and at the end of intervention. It is expected that attendance will improve significantly or rather truancy will show significant decrease once intervention is applied. The second focus of this research evaluation is also analyzed by using measures of central tendency. It is expected that expansion efforts of the service delivery area for the school district will be accomplished by increasing the number of schools making a referral to TIP.

Additional data for research purposes were examined after the research evaluator attended one TIP hearing and reviewed several attendance reports identifying habitually truant high school students. Although high school students were not served by TIP during the evaluation cycle of this research evaluation, those attendance reports did provide some insight on what can be expected after middle school if effective intervention at the elementary or middle school level is not applied.

Tables and bar graphs, are presented to show the Panel's level of effectiveness on improving attendance. In addition, tables and bar graphs are presented to show whether or not expansion efforts of the project were achieved.

For future reference, it is advisable that all potential barriers to evaluation efforts be given serious consideration prior to the implementation of the evaluation.

Those non-considered barriers, such as limited access to student's records, whether or not the program is currently under funding considerations, and loss of population due to sudden non-participation of selected sites for data collection can seriously hamper data collection. This inevitably can change the entire focus of the research evaluation. Confidentiality issues particularly, can be a significant hindrance to data collection. Conducting research evaluation projects present as much rigor as

standard research. The challenges faced can be quite different from that of standard research, and the practitioner must be skilled and prepared to anticipate those challenges, as well as have a plan in place to meet such challenges. They have the potential to significantly impact evaluation findings and how those findings will be interpreted.

Research Evaluation Questions

This research evaluation considers the output component of TIP; that is, what is the outcome when intervention is applied. This research evaluation also considers whether or not TIP's objectives were achieved. This research evaluation project addresses the following evaluation questions:

- Did the TIP program meet its objective to decrease the truant behavior of students referred to the program?
- Did TIP meet its objective to expand the project to the entire Cobb County School District after the first year of project implementation?
- Finally, is the TIP project model, a multi-disciplinary approach, the most effective program model in dealing with truancy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research evaluation determined that intervention projects like TIP can reflect momentary success, however long-term impact on truancy rates is inconclusive. Continued outcome evaluation efforts as well as impact and process evaluations (program monitoring) on a consistent basis must be conducted in order to adequately assess the projects effectiveness in decreasing such pathological behaviors like habitual non-attendance to school or truancy.

The following chapters invite the reader to review existing literature on truancy and intervention programs, examine the Truancy Intervention Panel of Cobb County Schools, Georgia, investigate the research evaluations methodology, query the findings and conclusions of this research, and finally, contemplate implications of this research evaluation as it relates to social work practice.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview of the Problem

Sometimes called the "gateway crime," truancy has been linked with delinquent activity as early as the 1800's. Social reformers recognized the link between truancy and delinquency as the rise in urban crime gave way to new concerns about the lack of parental control and supervision of children. In 1942, a pair of researchers conducted a detailed study of delinquency in Chicago where they found that the frequency of delinquent behavior closely matched the rates of truancy exhibited by the delinquent offenders (Gavin, 1997). A study conducted by Snyder (1988), which examined the delinquent history of juvenile offenders throughout the U.S., indicated that nearly all of the 70,000 juvenile offenders interviewed had initial referrals to juvenile court related to truancy or truant behavior. An estimated 90,000 status offenses (truancy, ungovernable, runaway) were formally disposed of by U.S. courts. Truancy cases had an increase of 22% between 1987 and 1991 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994).

It has been suggested that between 1% and 8% of school age children in America will have some problem with school

attendance by the new millennium (Granell de Aldaz, Vivas, Gelfand, & Feldman, 1984). Six years ago, the National Association of Social Workers in Education estimated that at least half a million children were truant on any given school day (Webb, 1993). As we consider that more than 54 million children will be enrolled in public and private schools by the year 2006, the problem of truancy will be at crisis proportions if the established trend of truancy continues (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). According to the Manual To Combat Truancy (1996), approximately 12 % of the students in Pittsburgh are absent each day, with 70% of those absences being unexcused. Likewise, in Milwaukee, there are a reported 4,000 unexcused absences occurring each school day.

Although most literature on truancy suggests that students between the ages of 13-17 are at the greatest risk for truant behavior (Goldberg, 1999; Rayner & Riding, 1996; Bosworth, 1994), there is indeed a concern that all school age children are increasingly becoming at risk for truancy (Twaite & Lambert, 1997). Some researchers argue that African American, Hispanic, and other non-white ethnic groups are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system (Cox, Davidson, & Bynum, 1995). This argument is further fueled by the prediction of the U. S. Bureau of the Census (1996), which indicates that in the next thirty years, the number of non-Hispanic white students

will fall below 50% of the student population, and that one in four school-aged children will be of Hispanic origin. Males from Hispanic, African American, and other non-white groups are at greater risk of experiencing school failure and dropping out of school all together (Gavin, 1997; Delgado, 1996). One can expect that the truancy rates among these groups will grow to disastrous proportions if something is not done soon.

Educational Response and Political Implications

The perception of an alarming increase in the number of students refusing to attend school, tied to concerns about the effect of truancy, has reinforced political and public anxiety about non-attendance rates. Educational reform acts such as Public Law 100-297 and The Elementary and Secondary Education Amendment (1988) both highlight the continuing political and educational priority of tackling the problems presented by truancy and poor school attendance. Such acts serve to promote the concern that truancy ultimately leads to a lifetime of unemployment, crime, and incarceration (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997). The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (which was amended in 1992), established Title V, a federal grant for prevention programs that eventually gave rise to the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Strategy Programs. This office recognized the need for prevention programs designed to reduce identified risk factors of delinquent youths while

strengthening proactive factors. Truancy was identified as one of those risk factors of which states could petition the program for funding to establish prevention programs that would address the problem.

Like most federal programs, securing funding through Title V is very competitive. In addition, the states must match the federal funding by 50% which proves to be a significant hindrance for those states already experiencing budgeting crisis in terms of education and special programs. The Department of Education instituted a \$10 million discretionary grant program to deal with truancy (1996), but the competition for these dollars is just as competitive (Children's Services Report, 1999).

In the U. S., there has been the tradition of decentralizing public education where the states have control over funding received, and whereby local school boards are given the task of setting actual educational policies and determining how educational grants and funding will be utilized regarding these set policies (Lowenthal, 1996). Because there has been the tendency for these boards to work independently of the local schools, communities, and direct service agencies, issues of truancy may take a back seat to more "pressing concerns." If policy at the level of implementation and articulation does not include input from professionals working directly in the schools, in the communities, and with the families of a particular school

district, as well as from parents, community members, and the students themselves, issues of truancy will be overlooked, or dealt with in a very punitive fashion and without consideration for the various enigmas affecting the level of truancy in a particular community.

Truancy Strategies and Reasons Attributed to Truant Behavior

In association with the Goals 2000 Initiatives for education, the U. S. Department of Education (in cooperation with the U. S. Department of Justice) issued the Manual to Combat Truancy (1996). This manual offers five primary elements of comprehensive community and educational strategies to combat truancy. They are:

- Involve parents in all truancy prevention activities.
- Ensure that students face firm sanctions for truancy.
- Create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility.
- Establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in schools.
- Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts.

Upon further evaluation of these recommended guidelines, they appear to respond to some primary causes of truancy: boredom with school and the desire to socialize

with peers (Goldberg, 1999); attitudes of the student towards school, their education, and their own self-concept (Bosworth, 1994); schools attitudes and policies towards students having difficulty including poor relationships between school staff and the student, unsuitable curricula, lack of personal attention, feelings of rejection and authoritarianism in school (Rayner & Riding, 1996); learning styles and personal deficits of the student (Rayner & Riding, 1996); lack of community support which include court and legal consequences; gangs and neighborhood peer pressure; availability of jobs; the opportunity to co-op (Goldberg, 1999); and the students right to self-determination in an effort to resolve their problems (Delgado, 1996).

Shifting the Paradigm

It is important to note that recent research supports the notion that schools are a large part of varying truancy trends (U. S. Department of Education, 1993). Though widely accepted in the past, the idea that the student's own pathology or family stressors are the primary reasons for truancy has been significantly challenged. Reid (1985) argued that school policies and teachers were largely to blame for truancy, while also making the observation that students consistently blame themselves, their schools and teachers for truant behavior, rather than their homes, or social or economic circumstances. Other research lends

support to the idea that schools in similar cluster areas experience different levels of truancy, and that schools do make a significant difference in the overall occurrence of truancy (Reid, 1985; O'Keefe & Stoll, 1995).

It stands to reason then, that social service professionals have a tremendous task in creating an environment of interfacing whereby the interactions, exchanges, and/or negotiations between the student, the school, the family, and community are met with positive results. Delgado (1996) suggests that in dealing with truancy, there should be a shift in the paradigm from one of scarcity or deficits whereby intervention is punitive and blaming, to one of strengths where an atmosphere of empowerment and self-determination challenge students to assume some responsibility over their behavior in the decision-making process (NASW, 1992). For the truant student, the focus is often on deficits instead of strengths, and the truant is regarded as being included in the "paradigm of scarcity" (Delgado, 1996) where the perception that youths do not possess the capabilities or resources to help themselves or their community.

Delgado (1996) emphasizes that the much held perception that the problems youths face are generally the result of their own inadequacies, culture, or failure to acculturate, and only "adults," "experts," and "formal organizations" can possibly help youths and their communities is often how the

problem of truancy is approached. He holds that shifting the paradigm from one of deficits to one of strengths empowers the student, the school, and the community. An environment for maximum potential output and successful negotiation of stress and conflict is created, and the student is able to recognize and embrace their strengths instead of nurturing their deficits, which ultimately leads to a decrease in behaviors like truancy.

The goal is to successfully engage the child and their environment in a mutually reinforcing interface where the change process encourages the natural strengths and resources yet untapped; ultimately leading to coping behaviors that allow for cohesive interactions between the various systems (Delgado, 1996; Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). The notion of shared responsibility enables those with a vested interest in truant behavior to focus on initiating integrative efforts to ensure the student will experience success, both educationally and socially.

Truancy Intervention Panel of Cobb County Schools

The following description is taken directly from TIP's Program Manual (1996). Assisted by Juvenile Court, Law Enforcement, the Department of Family and Children Services, the Department of Children and Youth Services, Mental Health, and the Health Department, Cobb County Public Schools developed a pilot Truancy Protocol to be implemented in five area schools for the 1997-1998 school year. If

successful, this pilot project titled Truancy Intervention Panel or TIP would expand the project to include all county schools beginning in 1998-1999 school year. TIP established the following protocol:

- When a student receives five unexcused or questionable absences within a six-week (30 school days) period, the Principal/Designee sends a letter addressing the compulsory attendance law.
- When a student receives ten cumulative unexcused or questionable absences within a twelve-week (60 school days) period or longer, school personnel forwards a written referral with an updated attendance record to the school social worker.
- If the truancy persists after reasonable attempts to correct the problem, the school social worker, in consultation with an administrator, teacher, and counselor determines whether the student should be referred to the Truancy Intervention Panel or TIP.
- If the student is referred to the Panel, the school social worker sends a referral form, attendance history, and other significant information to the Juvenile Court Judge.

- A letter is prepared by the Juvenile Court requesting that the student and parent(s) attend an informal hearing with the Panel.

Panel members review the student's attendance history, efforts to address attendance prior to the Panel referral, and other identified problems. Suggestions may be made to address problems identified after consulting with the student, parent, and social worker. The child and parent then enter into a contract with the Panel stating each party's responsibility to improve attendance as well as address any other presenting problems. Case managers from the Next Steps Program, which specializes in emotional/social adjustment issues interviews the family to determine if they will benefit from services provided by Next Steps. At the conclusion of the Panel meeting, supervision which involves case management activities (i.e., home visits, weekly attendance monitoring/recording, phone calls, referral to additional supportive services) are conducted by the Truancy Liaison who serves as a school social worker for Cobb County. The Truancy Intervention Panel has two primary objectives:

- Decrease incidence of questionable or unexcused absences for students referred to the Panel as having attendance problems.

- Expand the project to include all 79 elementary and middle schools in the Cobb County School District by the 1998-1999 school year.

Panel Model: The Truancy Intervention Panel has a multi-disciplinary intervention model approach. This model is very similar to the Complex Prevention Initiative Model or CPI (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). This model is a collaborative effort between several different agencies organized to effectively address the problem of truancy. This type of model seeks to utilize and involve formal and informal resources from within and outside of the school in mutually reinforcing, risk-focused prevention strategies (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999). The major difference between the CPI model of approach and TIP's model of intervention approach is CPI's approach is prevention focused, where as TIP's model is intervention focused.

Panel members include an Associate Judge, a Department of Family & Children's Services supervisor, a Department of Youth Services representative, a representative from the Sheriff's Department, a representative from the Next Steps Program, a representative from the Cobb County Board of Health, a Cobb County School Social Worker, a citizen from a community organization, and an attorney.

Panel Stakeholders: The Panel stakeholders include the students referred to the Panel, invested family and community members, school administration, Cobb County School

Social Workers, and Panel Members who are professional volunteers from the community. Panel members are provided no monetary compensation for participation.

Limitations of the Literature

Existing research suggests that although many truancy intervention programs have been implemented, there is no one model or approach that has been shown to consistently reduce truant behavior. In fact, most communities approach the problem based on successful programs in other communities. This may not always be the best approach to program development and implementation because certain factors specific to the student and community must be considered if the program is going to experience success.

The literature speaks to those program models experiencing some success and even failure, however there are significant gaps in the literature regarding the evaluative components of these truancy intervention programs, as well as the type of evaluations performed to determine program effectiveness. Unless more research literature speaks to the evaluation process of intervention programs and the significance these evaluations have on the program findings, reliable and valid conclusions about a particular truancy intervention program's success and or failures (short or long-term) cannot be drawn.

This research evaluation in examining program effectiveness, considers the impact research evaluations

have on program outcomes or findings. In addition, this research evaluation emphasizes the importance of program evaluations of intervention strategies designed to address social issues that impact society. Those professionals seeking the most effective means to successfully address social pathologies will find program evaluations to be an effective tool in encouraging intervention strategies or programs that speak to the issue of truancy.

As the problem of truancy continues to challenge schools and society to respond to the growing/changing needs of today's youth, the need for effective intervention programs grow. Intervention programs like TIP, with a multi-disciplinary approach, encourage innovative and creative strategies to deal with truancy. However, the need for such programs is profoundly understated. This makes the task for social work practice and other youth responsive programs and policies more cumbersome, less manageable, and limited in their efforts to provide the families in affected school districts with access to intervention programs and much needed resources.

The next chapter presents the research evaluations methodology including sample population and setting, measures used to collect data, research evaluation design, research evaluation procedures, data analysis, and conclusions. Research evaluation threats to reliability and

validity as well as research evaluation limitations are presented.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research evaluation methodology. The research sample and setting are provided. Challenges to securing the sample population as well as threats to the reliability of the research evaluation are explored. Measures used to collect data are explained, and threats to the reliability and validity of data collection are discussed. Research evaluation design and procedures are also discussed in this chapter, as well as data analysis and finally methodology conclusions.

Sample and Setting

Participants considered in this research evaluation project were referred to the Truancy Intervention Panel or TIP project of Cobb County Schools, Georgia. The research evaluation was for the 1997-98 and 1998-99 school year. Students attended the five area schools chosen to participate in the pilot project (elementary and middle schools) during the first year of the project (1997-1998). Students were referred from nine (9) other Cobb County Schools in addition to the select five during the second year of the project (1998-1999). Students attended any one

of the sixty-one (61) elementary and eighteen (18) middle schools in Cobb County. Students referred to the Panel ranged from 1st to 8th grade. There were a total of 21 students participating in Panel activities during the 1997-1999 school years (research evaluation period). A total of 8 students were referred during the 1997-1998 school year. A total of 25 students were referred during the 1998-1999 school year. Out of those 25 referred during the 1998-1999 school year, only 13 actually participated in Panel activities. The others were referred on to juvenile court, moved to another school district before their scheduled panel hearing date, or referred to some other social agency for case management or supervision. Out of those 21 students served by TIP, 10 were female and 11 were male. They ranged in age from 7 to 16 years (mandated ages for Georgia's Compulsory School Attendance Laws). The race and socio-economic background of the students were not considered as this information was unavailable or difficult to retrieve.

Measures

Archival or non-obtrusive data from school attendance records and the projects existing compiled statistics for the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school year were used as the primary source of data collection. Archival data yields high reliability and validity because the information/statistics are compiled on a regular and consistent basis. It is often

used as a guide in determining if intervention is necessary. Statistics were also retrieved from school attendance records by the Truancy Liaison. The Truancy Liaison monitors the student's attendance on a weekly basis by reviewing information from weekly school attendance reports. For the purpose of this research evaluation, data collected were based on the date of referral to TIP through the end of the academic school year. Data were retrieved by retrieving the student's attendance records during the year of intervention. In addition, data were collected by reviewing the records of TIP and their compiled statistics for each student during the intervention school year. These records indicated number of absences (questionable or unexcused) prior to TIP intervention as well at the end of TIP intervention. These records also indicated the student's gender, number of tardies prior to and at the end of TIP intervention (1997-1998), and the school the student is referred to TIP from. Data was compiled from these records and attendance reports by considering the gender variable whereby the student's attendance rates are grouped according to gender. In addition, attendance rates are grouped according to grade level and the number of absences prior to and at the end of TIP intervention (1997-1998 and 1998-1999).

Due to confidentiality laws regarding school records, retrieval of attendance records was challenging and a

lengthy process. A major limitation to this type of data collection is the amount of time expended securing approval to access student records. Written consent must be given before any aspect of the research evaluation involving student records and access to students can begin. Although approval was obtained, (but not without considerable delay to data collection) some school systems require that only authorized personnel can access student records. Further research evaluations should make certain that enough time is delegated for data collection during the original planning phase of the evaluation project. This allows the research evaluation to anticipate constraints to data collection and missed deadlines as a result of untimely data retrieval.

Design

A pre-test/post-test non-experimental group design was used in this study. It is depicted as follows: O X O
where

o = attendance before intervention

x = TIP intervention

o = attendance at the end of intervention.

The design is an adequate measure of attendance as it relates to truancy as well as the intervention applied. Data on client satisfaction not collected due to administrative barriers and time-constraints; therefore controlling for extraneous variables impacting attendance was not feasible. This renders serious threats to the

internal validity of this research evaluation. It is advisable that future research evaluation projects take appropriate steps to control for extraneous variables in the original evaluation plan. Again, it is essential that enough time be allotted for the data collection phase when attempting to conduct credible evaluations. Input from all stakeholders (which includes students and their parents) is a part of establishing the reliability and validity of findings of the research evaluation project. The inability to control for such factors impact data outcome, and must be addressed if reliable, valid conclusions about a program's effectiveness can be made. This research evaluation considers findings in existing literature to establish some reliability and validity for this study.

Procedures

After acquiring written approval from the Research Department of Cobb County Schools, information on student's attendance for the students participating in TIP for the 1997-1998 school year, and 13 students participating in the project during the 1998-1999 school year was obtained. Attendance records were also retrieved from the project's compiled data on attendance before and during intervention. Attendance records from the school's attendance report and the project's compiled statistics were compared for consistency. The data were then grouped by gender, grade level, and overall attendance.

For the second phase of the research evaluation data on the number of schools participating in TIP for the second year (1998-1999) were collected. The total number of elementary and middle schools in Cobb County School District was compared to the actual number of schools utilizing the Panel as a means of dealing with their truancy issues. The number of elementary and middle schools in Cobb County was extracted from the Cobb County Schools 1998-1999 Annual Report. The number of schools making a referral to TIP was retrieved from the Panel's own records which indicates the names of schools referring students to the Panel for truancy issues.

Finally, a review of existing truancy intervention model approaches exhibiting long-term effectiveness in decreasing truancy was considered and compared to TIP's project model (multi-disciplinary approach) to determine if this model is the most effective means to deal with truancy and related issues in Cobb County Schools.

Data Analysis

Measures of central tendency were performed to analyze truancy prior to and at the end of intervention. Measures of central tendency were also used to determine whether or not expansion efforts of TIP during the 1998-1999 school year were achieved.

The methodology used in this evaluation is easily replicated, however future research evaluation projects are

encouraged to pay special attention to the challenges data collection and confidentiality can pose particularly when attempting to evaluate school-based programs, or programs with significant social implications. The following chapter presents data depicted in tables, bar graphs, and pie charts. Discussions of data findings and conclusions to this research evaluation are found in chapter five.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The data in this chapter present statistical findings on truancy prior to and at the end of intervention. Attendance rates were examined to determine positive or inverse relationships. Data on the number of schools actually making referrals to TIP were compared to the total number of elementary and middle schools in Cobb County School District. Each set of data responds to the first two research questions and/or research evaluation goals. The third research question or research evaluation goal elicits qualitative arguments and assumptions that examine intervention approaches contextually.

Demographics

There were twenty-one (21) students receiving intervention from TIP during the research evaluation cycle. Regarding gender, ten (10) were female and eleven (11) were male. Regarding grade levels, eleven (11) were in grades six (6th) through eight (8th) and 10 were in grades one (1st) through five (5th). Out of the twenty-one students, ten (10) ranged in age from seven (7) through eleven (11) and eleven (11) ranged in age from twelve (12) to sixteen (16). Due to

time constraints and limited access to student records, race and socio-economic backgrounds of students were not considered in the demographic data. Demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information on students referred to TIP during the 1997-1999 school years.

Variables (1997-1999)	N=	Percentage
Age		
7 years to 11 years	10	48.0
12 years to 16 years	11	52.0
Gender		
Male	11	52.0
Female	10	48.0
Grade		
1 st - 5 th	10	48.0
6 th - 8 th	11	52.0

The data depicted provide no discernable difference between demographic factors. Percentage wise, each gender, age group, and grade level were equally represented for truancy problems. Chapter five discusses finding as they relate to the national trend.

Attendance Patterns

This section depicts student's attendance patterns prior to and at the end of intervention. Archival data from school's attendance reports as well as TIP's compiled statistics on attendance patterns provide numerical indications of attendance during the two stages. Attendance for six (6) of the eight (8) student's referred during the 1997-1998 school year showed either significant or slight improvement in attendance patterns; that is consistent attendance of no more than five to ten unexcused or questionable absences during the intervention period. Two students attendance worsened during intervention; that is unexcused or questionable absences increased by at least ten percent (10%) during the intervention.

For the thirteen (13) students referred to TIP during the 1998-1999 school year, nine (9) students showed either significant or slight improved attendance. Three (3) students' attendance worsened during intervention. One (1) student moved out of district between the time of referral and actual intervention.

Tables 2 and 3 reflect attendance patterns for the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school year. Figure 1 presents a bar graph depiction of attendance patterns.

Table 2: Attendance Patterns for students prior to and at the end of intervention during the 1997-1999 school year. Absences were considered out of the 182 day school year.

Student	N= absences prior to intervention	N= absences at the end of intervention	N= positive or negative change in attendance
1	21	14	- 7
2	15	23	+ 8
3	27	6	-21
4	29	10	-19
5	32	3	-29
6	30	17	-13
7	35	5	-30
8	10	30	+20
N = Total	199	108	
number of Days			

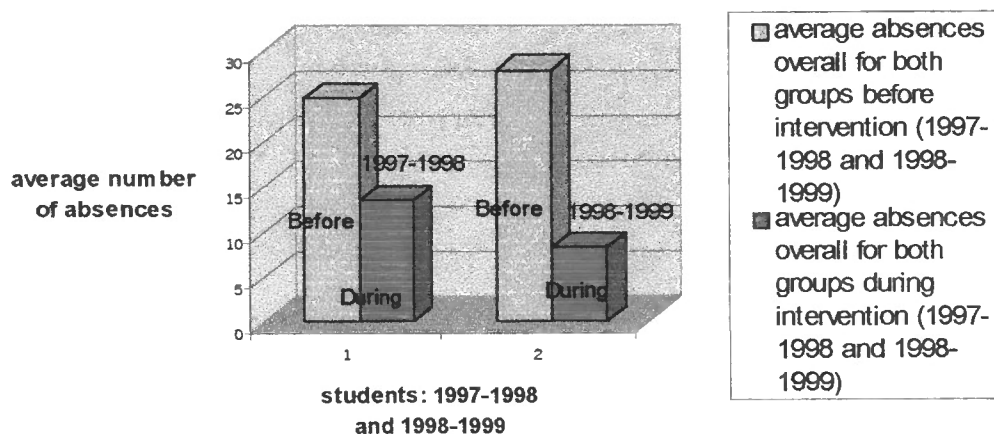
The mean of absences at baseline was 24. At the end of intervention the mean was 13.5. Overall, absences for baseline and intervention mean was 10.5.

Table 3: Attendance Patterns for students prior to and at the end of intervention during 1998-1999 school year. There were a total of 180 school days for 1998-1999.

Student	N= absence prior to intervention	N= absence at the end of intervention	N= positive or negative changes
1	9	6	- 3
2	19	32	+13
3	20	18	- 2
4	26	4	-22
5	29	0	-29
6	19	10	- 9
7	33	3	-30
8	46	11	-35
9	20	1	-19
10	20	6	-14
11	24	8	-16
12	50	9	-41
13	49	0	-49
N=Total days	374	108	

The mean of absences at baseline was 28 days. At the end of intervention, the mean value was 8.3 days. Overall mean for absences was 20 days. Figure 1 depicts absenteeism trends prior to and at the end of intervention for both the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school year.

Figure 1. Average number of absences prior to and at the end of intervention for the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school year.

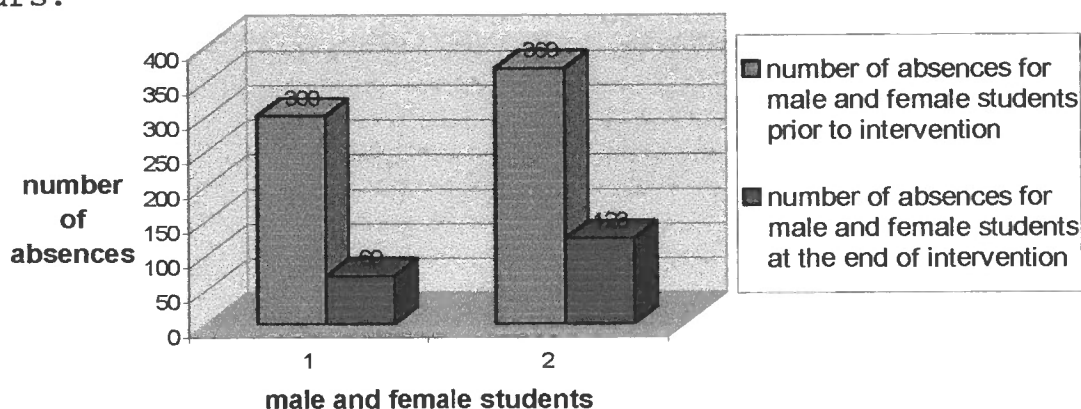


Data on the gender factor are depicted in Table 4. The data indicates the total number of days absent for both male and female students referred to TIP during the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school year. The data determine that the males missed a total of 300 days prior to intervention and a total of 69 days at the end of intervention. The female students missed a total of 369 days prior to intervention and a total of 123 days at the end of intervention. The mean value for male non-attendance prior to TIP intervention was 27.3 days. The mean value for female students prior to TIP intervention was 26.6 days. At the end of intervention, the mean value for non-attendance was 6.3 days for males and 12.3 days for female students. Table 4 and Figure 2 reflect gender patterns of attendance.

Table 4: Male/Female attendance patterns prior to and at the end of intervention during the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school years.

Males	N= absences prior to intervention	N= absences at the end of intervention	Females	N= absences prior to intervention	N=absences at the end of intervention
1	9	6	1	19	32
2	20	18	2	19	10
3	26	4	3	33	3
4	29	0	4	20	6
5	46	11	5	50	9
6	20	1	6	21	14
7	24	8	7	15	23
8	49	0	8	27	6
9	29	10	9	32	3
10	35	5	10	30	17
11	13	6			
N= total	300	69		266	123
number of days missed					

Figure 2: Gender patterns of attendance prior to and at the end of intervention for the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school years.

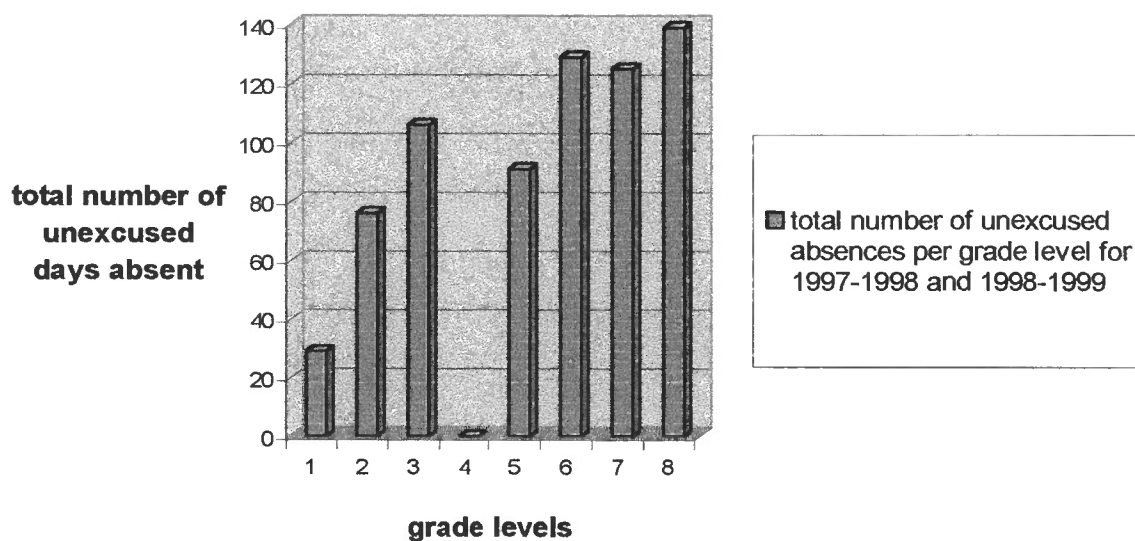


The last variable considered were grade levels and the incidence of non-attendance prior to TIP intervention. Out of the twenty-one (21) students referred to TIP, one (1) was a 1st grader with a total of twenty-nine (29) days absent or 1% non-attendance. Grade 2 had two (2) referrals with a total of seventy-six (76) days absent or 21% non-attendance. Grade 3 had three (3) referrals with a total of 106 days absent or 29% non-attendance. Grade 4 had no referrals. Grade 5 had four (4) referrals with 95 days total absent or 25% non-attendance. Grade 6 had three (3) referrals with a total of 129 days absent or 39% non-attendance. Grade 7 had four (4) referrals with a total of 125 days absent or 34% non-attendance. Finally grade 8 had five (5) referrals with a total of 139 days absent or 38% non-attendance. Table 5 and Figure 3 depict data across grade levels for non-attendance prior to TIP intervention.

Table 5: Grades 1st through 8th days absent for the twenty-one (21) students referred to TIP prior to and at the end of intervention for 1997-1999 school years.

School year	N= 1 st grade	N= 2 nd grade	N= 3 rd grade	N= 4 th grade	N= 5 th grade	N= 6 th grade	N= 7 th grade	N= 8 th grade
1997- 1998	0 days	38 days	0 days	0 days	0 days	72 days	40 days	82 days
1998- 1999	29 days	38 days	106 days	0 days	91 days	57 days	85 days	51 days
Total	29 days	76 days	106 days	0 days	91 days	129 days	125 days	139 days

Figure 3: The number of days absent per grade level for the 1998-1997 and 1998-1999 school year.



Expansion Efforts

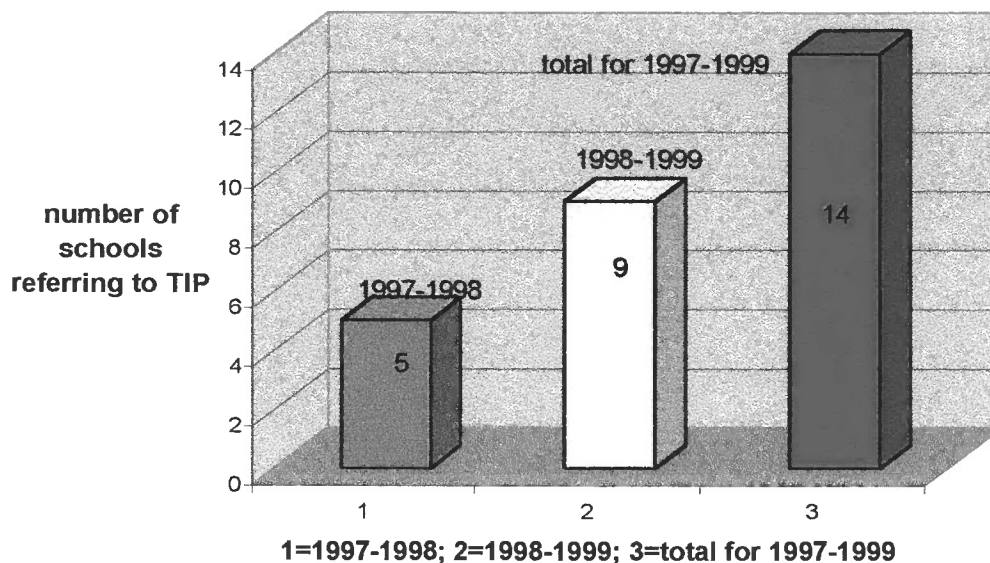
The second phase of this research evaluation considers the total number of elementary schools in the Cobb County School District, the number of schools participating in the TIP project during the first year of the project, and number of schools participating during the expansion or second year of the project. During year two, the project was to expand from five (5) schools during the first year to district wide. There are a total of seventy-nine (79) elementary and middle schools in Cobb County Schools.

Table 6 depicts the number of schools (elementary and middle) in the district, the number of schools participating in the project the first year (1997-1998) and the number of school participating in the project the second year (1998-1999) which is supposed to be TIP's expansion year.

Table 6: The total number of elementary and middle schools in Cobb County School District in comparison to the total number of schools participating in TIP for the first two years of the project, 1997-1999.

Variable	N=	Percentage
Schools making referrals to TIP during 1997-1998	5	6.3%
Schools making referrals to TIP during 1998-1999	9	11.3%
Total number of schools making a referral during 1997-1999	14	17.7%
Total number of elementary and middle schools.	79	

Figure 4: The total number of elementary and middle schools in Cobb County and the total number of schools making a referral to TIP during the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school year.



Based on the statistics, the project increased participation by 11.3% during the second year of implementation. Overall, just 17.7% of the seventy-nine (79) elementary and middle schools in Cobb County made a referral to TIP.

Findings

Based on the findings, truancy for half of the students showed a significant improvement in attendance rates, however that same number either had no improvement or worsened in attendance. Male and female attendance at the end of intervention improved significantly. Improved attendance for both groups was about the same, although

female students missed more days than male students. Overall, the data indicate that truancy declined significantly. During the 1997-1998 school year truancy rates decreased from an average 24 days non-attendance per student to an average of 13.5 days non-attendance per student. During the 1998-1999 school year, average non-attendance improved from 28 days per student to 8.3 days. This suggests that TIP had a significant effect on improving truancy rates. Across grade levels, non-attendance prior to TIP intervention increased with each increased grade level.

As the research evaluation relates to research question #2, based on the numbers indicated, expansion efforts were not successful. Only about 18% out of the seventy-nine (79) schools in the district took advantage of the Truancy Intervention Panel services.

The following chapter discusses research evaluation findings as it relates to existing literature and other program findings. In addition, research evaluation question #3 is explored and conceptually examined in an effort to respond to the research question concerns of whether or not TIP is utilizing the most effective model approach to deal with truancy.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents a discussion of research findings as they relate to existing literature. Research evaluation findings for the three evaluation questions are addressed as well as limitations of this research evaluation, and future recommendations for other research evaluation projects are explored.

Research Question #1: Program Effectiveness

Regarding overall attendance patterns, the findings of this research evaluation suggest that truant behavior decreased at the end of TIP intervention. Hence, a positive correlation between improved attendance and TIP intervention is inferred. Incentive-based programs like that of North Schylkill Junior and Senior High School (Phillips, 1995) showed significant improvements in attendance for those student's exhibiting truancy problems once an intervention strategy or approach was applied. The incentive-based approach has shown long-term program effectiveness over a six-year period. The program attributes an intermingling of several different intervention types that were incentive-based as reasons for improved attendance.

Although, much like this research evaluation, the incentive-based program at North Schylkill Junior and Senior High School recognized that other factors (extraneous variables) not examined may very well have impacted the success of the intervention applied, and not just the intervention itself. This would suggest that several variables impacting student's attendance to school must be considered when assessing program effectiveness.

Literature indicating correlations between attendance patterns and intervention approaches across gender is limited. Most literature speaks to the differences in attendance patterns across gender in general. This research evaluation found no studies specifically examining truant behavior across gender. Findings of this research evaluation indicate no discernable difference between attendance patterns of both genders at the end of intervention. They either improved, showed no improvement, or had worsened attendance. It is interesting however, to note that the female students non-attendance rates prior to intervention were considerably higher than their male counterparts. Female students missed an average of 36.9 days prior to intervention as opposed to the male students who missed an average of 27.7 days. There is almost a ten (10) day difference in terms of average missed days for female students. This seems to be consistent with a poll found on the internet website for React Magazine (Anonymous,

1988). One question on the poll asked, "How do you make cutting school less tempting?" Teens responded by suggesting that schools open a fast food restaurant like Burger King on campus. Although 42% of the male respondents stated that they would be less likely to cut school with this type of incentive, 48% of the female respondents reported that after lunch, they would skip school for the remainder of the day. This indicates that female students are less compelled to stay at school after they have received their reward. Findings like these as well as those of this research evaluation suggest that truant behavior among female students demand the same level of attention, if not more so, that male students have received when examining truancy problems.

Regarding grade levels, this research evaluation, like other research (Goldberg, 1999; Phillips, 1995) suggests that those students considered to be at high risk of truant behavior in high school are easily identified in middle and for some elementary school. Students tend to decrease attendance as they progress from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. In reviewing non-attendance patterns across grade levels for this research evaluation, data findings indicate that school attendance problems in Cobb County are much like that of any other school district across the county. In addition, this study further emphasizes the need for intervention during the elementary and middle school

years. Programs like Campus Court → Truancy Court Model (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 1994) and the incentive-based program and The Prompt and Present Club of Langley Park McCormick Elementary School (Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996) re-iterate the need for truancy intervention programs at the elementary and middle school grades.

Research Question #2: Expansion Efforts

The second objective of this research evaluation was to determine if the goal, expand the service delivery area of TIP to include the entire county of the Cobb County School District during the second year, 1998-1999 of the project was achieved. The data showed a minimal increase in the number of schools making a referral to TIP during the second year of the project. This suggests that expansion efforts statistically were unsuccessful. The project received referrals from nine new schools the second year of implementation in addition to the five schools included in the pilot. The county itself has a total of seventy-nine (79) elementary and middle schools. When considering that the projects first year of service provided truancy intervention to five selected area schools, the increase in district participation during the following year was about 18%. That is a little less than a quarter of the seventy-nine (79) schools in the county participating.

Truancy intervention programs like, At School, On Time, Ready to Work of Neosho County, Kansas have been able

to expand their service delivery successfully by gradually integrating small numbers of elementary schools into the program (Davies, 1995). Gradual integration seems more realistic since some schools will be very slow to refer. Still others may have their own established intervention strategies that they prefer to use in dealing with truancy. Because TIP is a small program, and realistically is not capable of serving all of the seventy-nine elementary and middle schools in Cobb County during one academic school year, gradual integration of schools into the program may render significantly greater numbers regarding new schools being served by TIP.

Consider that at any one time out of the approximate 93,400 students attending Cobb County Schools for the 1999-2000 school year, ten percent (10%) of those students will be absent on any given school day. At least a third of that ten percent (10%) will be absent due to questionable or unexcused reasons (Cobb County School District Annual Report for 1998-1999, 1999) if Cobb County keeps in line with the national trend of absenteeism. That is about 3,400 students exhibiting truant behavior every school day in Cobb County Schools.

Cobb County is the 31st largest school district in the country, and one can anticipate that this county will have substantial problems with truancy and truancy related issues. Expansion of intervention projects like TIP can

definitely attack the problem of truancy in Cobb County, however given the amount of human and service related resources required to adequately service seventy-nine schools, expansion efforts should be slow and considerate of the available resources needed to serve schools making referrals to TIP.

Research Question #3: Effective Truancy Intervention Models

Historically, truancy has been viewed as a form of deviant behavior and thus, any formal models have tended to be developed by educational sociologists and psychologists (Bosworth, 1994). However, "New Right" explanations of non-attendance have put forward the notion of the pupil as a consumer and shifted the emphasis of the debate away from social deviance and towards rational choice (Carlen, 1992; Bosworth, 1994).

Hence, alternative approaches to dealing with truancy is being sought to get the best blend of proven truancy intervention program effectiveness. Those intervention programs or strategies determined to be most effective consider various factors, including school factors (Goldberg, 1999). Studies suggest that schools attribute truancy to the individual, family, and community factors out of the control of the school (Zeisner, 1984; Goldberg, 1999). However, the argument can be made for several factors influencing truant behavior. The charge for service directed professionals today, particularly those attempting

to implement program models that will have long-range effectiveness in decreasing the incidence of truancy, must determine what model is going to be the best approach for the consumers the program will be serving.

Most truancy programs are preventive-based, and those rendering consistent indications of success incorporate the collaborative model that is service intensive, have regular, consistent monitoring of attendance as well as program activities, involves counseling, law enforcement activities, court participation, incentive-based activities, community organizing, and school, parental and youth input and advisement (Children's Services Report, 1999; Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, 1997). As mentioned earlier, programs like At School, On Time, Ready to Work (Neosho County, KA.), the Atlanta Bar Association's Truancy Intervention Project (Atlanta, GA.), The Truancy Court Model (Bradley County, TN.), and Truancy Interdiction (Inglewood, CA. and St. Petersburg, FL.) all show impressive long-term results in decreasing their truancy problems (Davies, 1995; Carter, 1999; National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 1994; Gavin, 1997). Although each used different intervention models while blending several of the activities mentioned, all were effective and maintained that effectiveness over the long-range.

Two very important components to consider that are incorporated into the model approaches of these programs are

the incentive-based components and the educational support strategies. Both appear to render consistent success in dealing with truancy for various school systems utilizing these strategies in their truancy intervention models. Neither of these components are a part of TIP's model approach, and given the large population Cobb County Schools serve, it is worth investigating these approaches in detail. Those programs utilizing the incentive-based component have student populations similar to that of Cobb County. Some examples of incentive-based rewards are giving out fast food restaurant coupons to students weekly if attendance is acceptable (Lovette & Jacob, 1995); getting a fast food restaurant to open on campus (Anonymous, 1998); giving day passes to local amusement parks (Lovette & Jacob, 1995); and establishing exhibitions centers where students can showcase their artistic or musical talents weekly (Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996). Incentive-based intervention models seem to be effective because they present the student with tangible positive reinforcers if truancy decreases. Positive reinforcers such as gifts, food, or tickets to fun activities strongly encourage desirable behavior and serve to enhance self-determination where the student is encouraged to become accountable out of their desire to receive a reward.

The other significant factor to consider is the educational component. "Understanding the way a student

learns is the key to educational improvement, and if attendance to school is to be encouraged, an intervention strategy must take into account individual differences in learning" (Griggs, 1991). If the student is not experiencing academic achievement in the classroom, and is frustrated by failures experienced in the classroom as a result of learning styles (which requires a change in teaching strategies), truancy is an inevitable reality for most students in this position. Collaborative efforts with members of school administration including teachers must be included in the initial intervention model if truancy is to be dealt with adequately. The At School, On Time, Ready to Work Program is a good example of one programs efforts to incorporate educational support into its mole approach (Davies, 1995).

TIP has a multi-disciplinary intervention model that incorporates many of the suggested components in model formulation for successful intervention and prevention efforts. However, it is advisable that TIP re-evaluate its existing project model to include the educational and incentive-based components as well as community, family, and student input as new program strategies are put in place. Incorporating these approaches increases the probability for long-term program effectiveness, and renders the program model an effective tool in combating the problem of truancy in schools.

Limitations to the Study

This research evaluation examined the Truancy Intervention Panel of Cobb County Schools, GA. Efforts to determine program effectiveness were challenging, and not without problematic concerns regarding the evaluation focus. Because certain demographic data regarding the socio-economic backgrounds and race of the student's were not considered due to time constraints and limited access to the research evaluation's primary data source, this research evaluation is very limited in efforts to draw conclusions about truancy as it relates to these specified demographics. For future research evaluation projects, it is recommended that such demographic information be incorporated, and necessary steps to retrieve this information be resolved before the evaluation project begins. This allows for greater reliability and validity of the research evaluation project.

Conclusions

Long-term goals for truancy intervention models should be to maintain consistent decreasing trends in the occurrence of truancy for students served by the intervention program. This reinforces the need for models that render long-term solutions instead of temporary improvements that inevitably encourage the return of undesirable behavior once the intervention has ended. This research evaluation asserts that TIP, like many truancy

intervention programs, is still trying to find that exact blend of program activities that will best meet the needs of the student, the schools, and the community.

The challenge then is to implement a proven, effective intervention model that incorporates strategies and/or approaches which seek long-term improvements of pathological behaviors like truancy. The problem of poor school attendance and related problems must be continually and vigorously addressed by educators, school social workers, parents, and community leaders (LoVette & Jacob, 1995). Research has indicated strong correlations between truant behavior and delinquency (Gavin, 1997; Snyder, 1988). Unless intervention approaches are strong in dealing with the issues of truancy, little success is experienced, and program effectiveness is significantly challenged.

CHAPTER SIX

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Because schools are enduring institutions in communities, they typically have the most long-term contact with students and their families; thus, they have the potential to become the central hub of coordinated services which serve as a link between the student, the school, families, and communities being confronted with the issue of truancy (Lowenthal, 1996). The school social worker, in working from a systems or ecological perspective, recognizes those reciprocal interactions between the student, their environment, and those systems adversely affecting the maximum potential for success of the child in an academic setting. It is the primary concern of the school social worker to make education possible for those students who otherwise would have difficulty coping with the educational process as it takes place and is defined in school. The school social worker must be armed with the skills needed to recognize and respond to the needs of the child and the system in an effort to coordinate services designed to address the needs of the individual and their impinging environment (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 1999).

When considering the implications for such intervention strategies in school social work practice, consider the following:

- Services provided by programs such as TIP should empower families to pursue proactive roles in dealing with negative behaviors by encouraging an active interaction between the entities providing the service.
- Services provided by programs such as TIP should be designed to prevent the further occurrence of the presenting problem, rather than implement interventions that render temporary success without accounting for long-term problematic behaviors that manifest after the intervention has ended.
- Because individuals are considered to be units of a family system, intervention strategies applied should be designed to treat the whole family unit as the undesirable behaviors are affected by the family's response to such behaviors.
- Finally, when deciding on a plan of action in dealing with students and their families, the school social worker should begin with family strengths or assets to offer positive interactions between the student, their family, and the various

systems playing a significant role in the decrease/elimination of the undesirable behavior.

School Social Workers as Change Agents

Dealing with truant students is very time-consuming, and resources are limited. When resources are not available, it is left to the creativity and innovation of the school social worker to devise strategies that promote academic success, the need to attend school, and a sense of self-determination which empowers the child as well as the school and the community. As change agents, school social workers are challenged to view the issue of truancy as problem-determined (Golishian, 1988), and encourage a problem-determined systems approach as the most effective means of dealing with truancy and related concerns. As indicated in chapter one, Golishian (1988) argues that systems do not produce problems, problems produce, or organize systems of problem-solvers. Problem-determined systems are identified and maintained through the interactions of individuals who are alarmed by the problem and actively engage in problem-solving efforts. Golishian further suggests that because of the activity of problem-solving, the system that coalesces around a problem may also be described as a solution-seeking system which conceptually can be quite useful in determining the origin and treatment of issues such as truancy.

In working from a systems and strengths perspective the school social worker is galvanized to target school policies and practices for intervention, rather than being restricted to "fix the student" phenomenon (Dupper & Evans, 1996) which inhibits the empowerment of the whole system. This requires new ways of thinking about old problems; where those exhibiting the problem of truancy are now encouraged to influence how the problem is "defined and solved" (Delgado, 1996).

Unless social workers are able to access the resources and devote the time needed to identify resources and implement effective strengths-based, problem-determined programs, the issue of truancy and other social foibles will see little resolve. Like the adult criminal justice system, our schools will be saturated with individuals exhibiting unacceptable behaviors that are mere symptoms of much deeper issues; where the primary cause of the behavior holds the child captive and prisoner to his own demons; the system a prisoner of the child's coping capacity.

APPENDIX
SITE APPROVAL LETTER

We, _____, give Sonia L. Gilkey permission to conduct evaluative research in Cobb County School District for the sole purpose of completing the degree requirements of the Master of Social Work at Clark Atlanta University. It has been explained by the research evaluator that this evaluation project must recognize the confidentiality laws related to student's school records. At no time should student's records be placed at risk of breach of confidentiality.

Research Evaluator

Site Liaison

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